MODERN FINE PRINTING IN AMERICA

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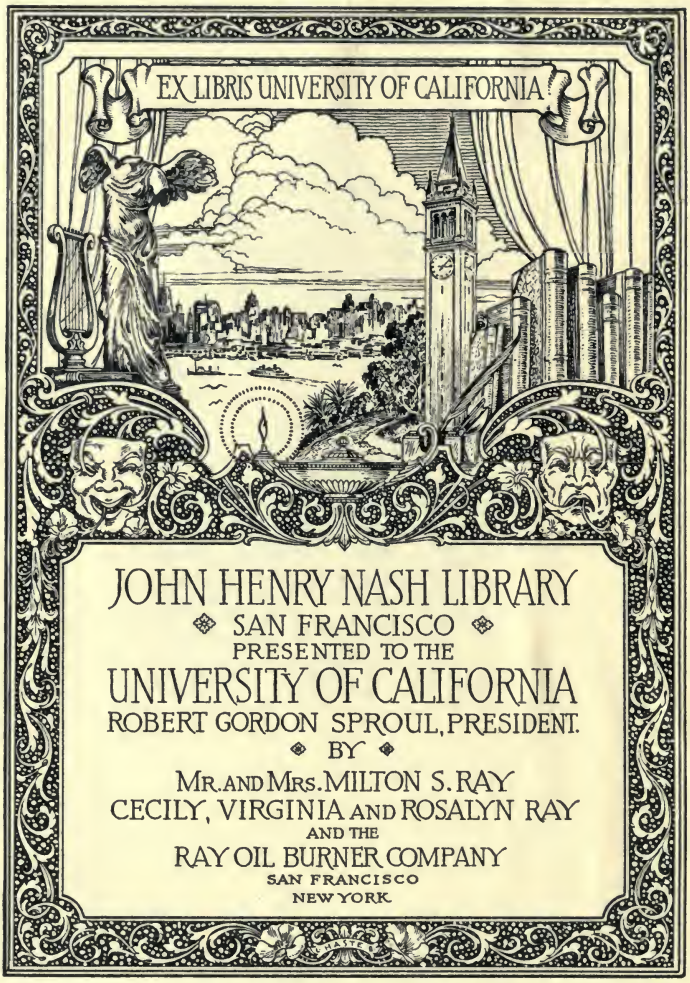

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MODERN FINE PRINTING IN AMERICA. AN ESSAY BY A. E. GALLATIN

NEW YORK: PRIVATELY PRINTED

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MODERN FINE PRINTING IN AMERICA.

THE traditions of fine printing are being upheld in America by a small, but constantly growing, group of enthusiasts: that was the very definite impression conveyed by the exhibition of contemporary American printing held in May, 1920, in New York. This exhibition, which was shown at the National Arts Club, under the auspices of the American Institute of Graphic Arts, was comprehensive in its scope, including in addition to books, collections of catalogues, folders, circulars, display cards and various other forms of commercial work. Typographical prints, posters and wood engravings were also shown, and these added greatly to the variety and interest of the exhibition.

Yet another interesting feature was a series of cases containing books illustrating the development of the printing art. This latter exhibit, a loan from the American Type Founders Company, proved to be a very instructive historical survey. The history of typography as practised in

Europe and America was set forth, from its invention in the fifteenth century right down to Bruce Rogers and his books printed at the Riverside Press. I say as practised in Europe and America, for printing was done from movable wooden blocks by the Chinese in the sixth century and by the Japanese in the eighth, while it is supposed that in Corea copper types were used in the beginning of the fifteenth century. First we were shown the books which were a combination of printing from types and the work of the illuminator, executed at Mainz (by Gutenberg), Cologne, Nuremberg and Basle. Then we saw the volumes issued from the Venetian press of Nicolas Jenson, the French master of type design, whose faces in this century have served as the inspiration for several of our greatest type designers. After these books followed those of another Venetian printer, Erhard Ratdolt, who entirely broke away from the illuminator. In turn these were followed by examples of the craftsmanship of the great Aldi family, also of Venice. Plantin, whose press was at Antwerp, Coster, of Haarlem, the Dutch Elzevirs and Caxton I do not think were represented. In adjoining cases were speci-

mens of the work of the eminent French printers of the sixteenth century, Robert Estienne, Claude Garamond and Geofroy Tory. Next we saw examples of the work of the seventeenth century printers of France, Holland and England, and then books printed in the latter part of the eighteenth century by Baskerville, Bodoni and Bulmer. Finally we were shown a group of William Morris's Kelmscott Press books, a volume from the Doves Press, one from the Ashendene Press, and in the last case of all, six superb books designed by Bruce Rogers.

The foregoing collection was admirably supplemented by a remarkable assemblage of early printed books containing decorative illustrations, which was on view at the Metropolitan Museum; this was a special exhibition, some of the volumes being the property of the Museum, and some being loans. Included among these volumes were books containing woodcuts by Dürer, Cranach, Weiditz and Holbein. A copy of the very rare edition of Dante's Divina Commedia, printed at Florence in 1481, which contains engravings attributed to Botticelli, was also on view, as was the first book to be printed with illustra-

tions in color, a work entitled Sphaera Mundi, printed in Venice in 1485. Among the later volumes of interest were copies of William Blake's America and Pastorals of Virgil, which are among the most individual and beautiful books ever made. Examples were also shown of the marvelously beautiful woodcuts of Edward Calvert and Thomas Bewick.

The revival of fine printing in this country dates back about a quarter of a century, and since then there has been a steady improvement in both the craftsmanship and the taste of our printers. The great mass of the commercial printing being done today in America is appallingly bad, and this is also true of our decorative illustration and the ornamentation of our books, but it is equally true that the standards of good book-making are being constantly advanced and that a great amount of notable and distinguished work is at present being produced in this country. America possesses as well a group of decorative draughtsmen who are doing some exceedingly fine work—a considerable portion of their designs being utilized by the large advertisers.

It was William Morris, who possessed con-

siderable knowledge of his craft, who brought about the renaissance of fine printing in England. Printing in that country had fallen to very low estate and the books which were issued by the Kelmscott Press are landmarks in the history of printing. But it cannot be denied that two of his three founts of type, the Gothic Chaucer and Troy, are entirely too heavy and medieval for present-day purposes; the Roman Golden type is far more legible. The limp vellum bindings, with their tapes, seem to me to be affected, as well as most unpractical. The initials and borders designed by Morris for his books are lacking in invention and are rather mechanical looking. His Chaucer, which is usually considered to be his masterpiece, is dreadfully overloaded with heavy and ornate borders, initial letters and illustrations. Aubrey Beardsley, one of the most vital artists that England has produced, and a really great ornamentist, far outstripped Morris in the designs which he made for Malory's Morte d'Arthur, in which he set out to rival the Kelmscott Press books. Numerous private presses were set up in England following the example of William Morris, including the Vale, the Eragny, the Essex

House, the Ashendene and the Doves. Of all these presses the Doves, which was founded by T. J. Cobden-Sanderson and Emery Walker, produced in many respects the most beautiful results; the great dignity and simplicity of their formats, and the beauty of their single fount of type, place these books among the masterpieces of modern printing. The exquisite Vale Press books are most original in format, with their types, initials, borders and patterned colored cover papers (or vellum bindings stamped with a design in gilt) designed by Charles Ricketts and Charles H. Shannon, the former having engraved the wooden blocks from which they were printed. These books built by Messrs Ricketts and Shannon, both versatile artists and true connoisseurs, at the Vale Press, as well as a few which were printed elsewhere, are true works of art in every way. The volumes issued by the other presses enumerated above are for the most part inferior productions; in but few of them (St. John Hornby's Ashendene Press books are among the exceptions) do we find echoes of the splendid traditions which were established in Great Britain by Caxton and Caslon and afterwards continued by Horace Walpole at his Straw-

berry Hill Press, by John Baskerville, by Robert and Andrew Foulis, and by Charles Whittingham, at his Chiswick Press.

The beautiful volumes, built according to the highest and purest traditions of the printing art, and invariably possessed also of a rich note of individuality, that have been created by Mr Bruce Rogers and by Mr D. B. Updike excel in merit those produced during any other epoch in America. The books designed by Mr Rogers, both during his connection with the Riverside Press at Cambridge, Massachusetts (1900-1911), as well as during the past few years, and by Mr Updike at his Merrymount Press in Boston, undoubtedly rank with the very choicest examples of the typography of our time.

No printer has shown as great versatility and variety in his work as has Mr Bruce Rogers. Quite different in format are the ninety-seven volumes designed by Mr Rogers up to 1916 which are listed in one of the publications of the Carteret Book Club of Newark. Designing his own types, as many printers did until the seventeenth century (and cut their punches as well), drawing or engraving his own initial letters and headpieces,

designing his bindings, in addition to laying out his books, the volumes of Mr Rogers are as distinctive as those printed at the Kelmscott, Doves and other English presses. What Mr Rogers has done, however, is a far greater achievement than that accomplished by any of these presses: for one thing, and this is an important point, his books are meant to be read, and are not merely *objets d'art.* Mr Rogers' volumes range all the way from a large folio, with illuminated roundels, inspired by a thirteenth century manuscript, to a three-volume edition of Montaigne's Essays, in folio; The History of Oliver and Arthur, set in black letter, to a diminutive edition of Ecclesiastes. Other volumes include an elaborate book on Geofroy Tory, an extremely beautiful edition of Chaucer's The Parlement of Foules, printed in black, red and blue, with gold initials, and an altogether delightful volume entitled Franklin and His Press at Passy, which was printed for the Grolier Club.

Every one of these books is distinguished for the technical excellence of its layout: the two pages are properly considered as being a unit, the margins are of correct and pleasing proportions, the type is always clear and of the right size for the

page, the composition is faultless, and the decorations are always suitable and form an integral part of the whole.

Mr A. W. Pollard, Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum, has written an appreciative essay on Mr Rogers' work in which he properly calls Mr Rogers the most vital force in modern typography. In the course of this essay Mr. Pollard writes that he is "eager to see him aim at the very highest and produce an individual and characteristic book with no antiquarian flavor." Modernity, it is true, has almost invariably been an attribute of the greatest art. Mr. Rogers, however, *has* designed a large number of books which are not possessed of an antiquarian flavor. I should like, at the same time, to see him produce a book which would reflect more of the spirit of our immediate epoch.

Mr D. B. Updike founded his Merrymount Press at Boston in 1893, although it was not until a little later date that he did anything but lay out his books. Since 1903 the press has occupied commodious quarters, equipped with the materials necessary to produce the very finest work, modeled to some extent after the University Press,

Oxford. Some of the types used at the Merrymount Press were designed by Mr Herbert Horne. Mr Updike's work is invariably distinguished for its faultless press-work, its restraint and its perfect taste.

At the exhibition of the American Institute of Graphic Arts, the gold medal awarded for the best printed book in the exhibition was given to the Norman T. A. Munder Company, of Baltimore, for a volume entitled Original Drawings by the Old Masters. This book had been laid out by William A. Bradley and T. M. Cleland and was a volume of facsimile reproductions in color. Mr Cleland, who is one of the most gifted designers of typographical ornaments and borders in this country, was responsible for the notably fine title-page, included within an elaborate border, as well as for the splendid initial letters. To Mr Cleland were justly awarded the gold medals in the catalogue and booklet classes. The excellent typographical placard which was used to advertise the exhibition, and which received the gold medal in the poster class, was designed by Mr Frederic W. Goudy, the well-known designer of several admirable type faces. This poster was printed by

Mr William E. Rudge, whose notably fine work carried off many other prizes.

No notes, however slight, on contemporary American typographical designers could afford to overlook the very distinguished decorative drawings of Messrs Guido and Lawrence Rosa, Charles R. Capon, Walter D. Teague and Edward B. Edwards. Practically all of their designs were made for commercial purposes, as were also the drawings and paintings of those true masters of poster design, Messrs Charles B. Falls, Edward Penfield and Adolph Treidler.

Following a representative exhibition of his woodcuts held a little earlier in the season at the Grolier Club, Mr Rudolph Ruzicka showed a smaller group of his engravings on wood at the American Institute of Graphic Arts Exhibition. One welcomed the opportunity to study these little masterpieces again, for nothing finer has been done in this country. Mr Ruzicka has mastered the technique of wood-engraving and his designs are always marked by true distinction; his subjects include views of New York and Newark, printed in colors, and a series of small engravings of the fountains of Papal Rome. Besides these,

Mr Ruzicka has cut a great many book-plates and private Christmas cards, the majority of them pictorial in treatment, although a number are purely decorative.

Upon the conclusion of this display of fine printing, the material which had been brought together was sent on a circuit for exhibition in various of the principal cities throughout the country and I have no doubt that it accomplished much in stimulating among our printers the desire to arrive at higher standards of excellence. I should like very much to see such an exhibition as this sent to London and Paris, in both of which cities I am sure it would receive a very favorable reception. I also believe that it would be most instructive and advantageous to our printers if similar exhibitions could be arranged abroad and sent to this country; this is something that I hope the American Institute of Graphic Arts will seriously take under consideration.

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